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RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1028
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3608
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0602
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1807
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0643
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000598

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: VIVA ZULIA - CHAVEZ AGAIN HITS ROSALES

REF: CARACAS 217

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

¶1. (C) Chavez accused the U.S. government March 5 of working behind the scenes to create a secessionist movement in Zulia to gain control of the state's rich oil industry. Chavez implicated the state's governor Manuel Rosales with the group and threatened Rosales with jail time if his accusations proved true. The chavista spin machine went into overdrive March 6, following up on Chavez's claims -- MVR deputy William Lara alleged that the Ambassador had also met with members of Rumbo Propio to discuss secession. (Note: According to Embassy records, the Ambassador has never met with the group or those cited by Lara.) The BRV has been pushing this separatist line since Chavez visited Zulia in January, and the March 5 attack on the governor is the latest in a series of attacks linking him with supposed secessionists. While Rosales has yet to speak directly on the latest accusations, his state secretary issued a denial March 6, claiming that Rosales had nothing to do with Rumbo Propio. We can expect to hear more from the BRV on the secessionist issue as the elections draw closer. It is a campaign banner that has the dual advantage of giving Chavez the opportunity to take pot shots at Rosales, one of three potential candidates who could pose any threat to him in the presidential elections, and at the United States at the same time. End summary.

Chavez to Rosales: "Don't be crazy"

¶2. (C) In the March 5 edition of his weekly television broadcast Alo Presidente, Chavez accused the United States of fomenting a secessionist movement to secure a government loyal to its interests in oil-rich Zulia state. Chavez accused the group Rumbo Propio ("Own Course") of working hand in hand with Zulia state governor Manuel Rosales and the United States to promulgate a referendum that would sever Zulia from Venezuela. Caracas daily El Nacional ran a profile

on the group that same day. (Note: Rumbo Propio advocates for a free market economy and calls for a state referendum to give Zulia the autonomy to govern itself -- without going so far as to call for Zulia's secession from Venezuela. The group was essentially unheard of until Chavez's accusations and is led by two university professors and a retired military officer.) Calling upon Rosales not to be "crazy", Chavez threatened Rosales with jail time if his accusations proved true and voiced his confidence that the "separatists" would be defeated by the "Armed Services, the republic, and above all the noble spirit of the Zulian people." Chavez argued that the so-called secessionist movement was part of a U.S. plan to remove him and called upon employees at the state oil company PDVSA, which has large operations in Zulia, to join the military reserve in order to guard the refineries against foreign invasions.

Chavismo Rallies Around Chavez

13. (C) Led by MVR deputy William Lara, the chavista spin machine went into overdrive March 6 to follow up on Chavez's claims. One step ahead of the curve, the attorney general's office released a press statement claiming it had opened an investigation into Rumbo Propio way back on February 2. Displaying uncharacteristic reserve, Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez admitted he would have to wait for the investigation's results prior to forming an official judgment, but he held out that the group "could have committed treason." MVR deputy William Lara applauded Rodriguez's initiative, and called upon him to investigate

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whether specific members of the group -- Nestor Suarez, Alberto Manzuetti, and Ildemar Ferrer -- had met on various occasions with the Ambassador, which he helpfully pointed out would constitute treason punishable by 20 to 30 years in prison under article 128 of the penal code. For good measure, Lara accused the Ambassador of an "open intrusion in Venezuela's internal affairs" for his alleged meetings with the so-called secessionist group. Pro-Chavez party Podemos Secretary General Ismael Garcia and MVR deputy Calixto Ortega

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also issued press statements calling upon Rosales to clarify his position. Garcia stated that if Rosales took up the project he would "lose completely and absolutely the support he has as a regional leader", while Ortega claimed there were already indications that Rosales was considering supporting the proposal.

The Opposition Strikes Back

14. (C) Rosales has previously denied any connection to separatist groups, and while he has not spoken directly on Chavez's latest accusations, Zulian State Secretary Nelson Carrasquero issued a categorical denial March 6 of Rosales, supposed activities with Rumbo Propio, stating that Rosales had nothing to do with the group. Other opposition leaders followed suite. Speaking from Zulia state, ex-National Assembly deputy and Rosales confidant Julio Montoya responded to Chavez's accusations March 6. Montoya stated that "We reject the President's accusations linking us with separatist movements and alliances with the Empire" (a chavista reference to the United States), and called upon Chavez to focus instead on addressing Venezuela's many problems. Montoya played down Rumbo Propio's pro-autonomy stance, claiming that what Zulia wanted was decentralization and its legal share of state funds to ensure the continuation of the state's social services. Opposition party Copei President Eduardo Fernandez claimed the BRV was sponsoring a climate of conflict in Zulia and said that Chavez should treat Zulia's leaders with respect.

COMMENT

15. (C) We have heard Chavez's separatist allegations against Rosales before, and we are sure to hear them many times again over the course of a year in which Chavez continues his efforts to treat the United States as the opposition candidate on the Venezuelan presidential ballot, while at the same time Chavez pummels any possible domestic opposition candidate. Chavez's rhetoric against Rosales and the United States March 5 were a convenient spin of the dial -- a warm-up act to a campaign season which has not yet even officially begun -- and should be taken with the requisite grain of salt. Rumbo Propio itself seems to have come out of nowhere; the timing and focus of the group's activities dovetail suspiciously well with Bolivarian propaganda. It should be viewed with caution. As the elections draw closer, Chavez's Sunday Alo Presidente program is sure to provide fodder for many more outrageous accusations against the United States and whoever else is willing to stand in the way of a government which steamrolls its opposition.
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